

Democrats and Democracy in New York

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It has been a bad week for New York State Democrats. Not only did they lose control of the state senate due to two Democratic state senators agreeing to vote on with the Republicans on leadership, but New York State's most powerful congressman and chair of the House Ways and Means committee, Charlie Rangel managed to bicker with the president of the United States.

These two issues seem unrelated, but they both grow out of the institutionalized dysfunction of Democratic politics in New York. The events in the state senate, which are being described in the local press as a coup, on the surface speak to the lack of party discipline among senate Democrats in New York, but on a more important level they demonstrate the price of one party dominance in New York City that is so great that candidates from an enormous ideological range identify themselves as Democrats. Legislative elections in New York City are decided by generally low turnout Democratic primaries with the general election being essentially a formality. There is, therefore, not only little incentive to run as anything but a Democrat, but frequently little known about candidates who sneak through low turnout multi-candidate primaries. While this is not the entire story regarding the two Democratic senators who effectively turned the senate over to the Republicans, the problem is still real.

The Democratic Party in New York, because it really is almost everything to almost everybody, has no ability to enforce party discipline in the senate, or to defeat candidates who do not represent the views of the party. Excessive ideological rigidity is not a great situation either, but without some discipline, parties are almost meaningless.

Rangel's comments illustrated another side of the problem of one party dominance, or perhaps more accurately another characteristic of one party dominance, an aversion to elections as evidenced by Rangel's description of a potential gubernatorial primary between David Paterson and Andrew Cuomo as being "devastating" and "racially polarizing". Clearly a primary between a sitting African American governor and a white challenger could break substantially on racial lines. However, the question this raises is "so what?"

The problem with Rangel's approach is that it comes very close to saying Democratic voters should not have a choice regarding whether or not they want to renominate an unelected governor because the primary might get ugly. The primary also might well either toughen Governor Paterson for the November election or lead the party to nominate a more popular candidate. Neither of these outcomes would be devastating.

On the other hand, Rangel's criticism of President Obama for urging Congressman Steve Israel not to challenge newly appointed US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand was accurate for several reasons. First, it rarely works out well for presidents when they get involved in internal party politics at the local or state level. Second, implicit in Rangel's comment was the notion that a primary for

senator would not necessarily be a bad idea. This is probably true, but underscores the inconsistency of Rangel's comments. Rangel cannot really have it both ways. What is good for Gillibrand would be good for Paterson as well.

Democrats in New York will not be well served if the top of the ticket in 2010 consists of two unelected and relatively unpopular officials. If primaries are avoided for both these offices it will represent a triumph of politics over democracy. Primaries for either or both these offices will almost certainly breathe life into the Democratic Party and create a process so that voters can raise their comfort level with their party's nominees, even if they remain Paterson and Gillibrand.

Charlie Rangel is an institution in New York politics. He is not speaking without any foundation when he warns of the perils of racially polarizing primaries. The mayoral races of 1977 and 1989, for example, were deeply racially divisive. Rangel, however, also knows that New York's Democrats no longer vote exclusively on race; and not every primary featuring candidates of different racial backgrounds is still racially polarizing. Rangel himself represents an increasingly diverse district with substantial African American, Latino and white populations. His district also has sizable Jewish and growing gay and lesbian populations. Rangel has always been well liked, by all groups in his district. Rangel also should be aware that if he was challenged by a white Democrat in a primary, his white constituents would not abandon Charlie Rangel to vote for a fellow white person. As a white constituent of Rangel's, I can promise that I certainly would not.

If, however, I am wrong and there still is a great deal of racial tension under the surface of the Democratic Party in New York, then a primary to sort that out might not be a bad idea. However, that is a big hypothetical. Paterson is not wildly popular with any group, including African Americans, so a primary between him and Andrew Cuomo would not necessarily be polarizing at all. The bigger problem the Democratic Party in New York faces is how to replace a one party system that, as we saw this week, values party labels more than cohesive vision or too often democracy itself with something that more closely resembles an engine of progressive change.